Rural Leaders' Experiences Implementing FAPE for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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To provide effective rural leadership and ensure students with intellectual disabilities are receiving an appropriate education, principals must understand the substantial needs of these students. Eight principals of remote rural school districts, with at least one year of leadership experience participated in this phenomenological study. Based on the findings, principals are not professionally prepared to provide FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, nor are they confident in their ability to do so and rely heavily on their special education teachers to comprehend and comply with educational mandates.

Keywords: rural school leadership, FAPE, intellectual disabilities

Students who are eligible to receive special education and related services are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). FAPE entitles all students ages 3 to 21 with a disability that impedes their learning to an individualized education program (IEP), that is designed to meet their individual needs to receive meaningful educational benefit. The concept of FAPE was first introduced into federal legislation through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Since then, the law has transformed to establish and refine the rights and responsibilities associated through FAPE and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (McKenna & Brigham, 2021).

Often, building principals are tasked with the instructional leadership responsibilities of ensuring students who qualify for special education receive an individualized program in the least restrictive environment (LRE). IDEA requires students who qualify for an IEP to participate with their peers in the general education setting to the maximum extent that is appropriate (IDEA, 2004). LRE ensures students are only removed from the general education classroom when the child's disability is so severe that classroom supplementary aids and services cannot provide the child with an appropriate education, and a special class or school is required to meet the student's individual needs (IDEA, 2004). Critics have argued that principal preparation programs inadequately prepare principals to be instructional leaders for special education (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Lynch, 2012; Young et al., 2009).

Remote school principals face additional challenges as they are expected to undertake a multitude of instruction, managerial, and supervisory responsibilities that may differ from their urban school district peers (Klocko & Justis, 2019). In addition, many remote rural school principals have additional work assignments that may include serving as the principal to more than one school, teaching part of the day, or serving as the superintendent or special education director (Cortez-Jimmenez, 2012; Masumoto & Browne-Welty, 2009; Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

Insufficient leadership preparation can have significant ramifications for remote school districts, in which, special education teacher retention rates are low, and special education program numbers are high (Collins et al., 2005; Courtade et al., 2010). Special education teachers in remote rural areas are most likely to leave their teaching position for a job in a more populated area in which they have significantly more resources, collegial support, and higher pay (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gather rural school principals' experiences implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities in remote school districts in a midwest state. A remote rural school district is defined as a rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized areas and is more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Of the state's 151 school districts, 96 of them are considered remote (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This study was qualitative in nature to provide participating principals the opportunity to explain their lived experiences in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities.

Little is known about what remote rural school principals experience in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. This is a significant gap in educational research because the experiences principals face in implementing FAPE impacts students' daily education

services. Gathering the common experiences remote rural principals encounter was important to develop a thick description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and to help inform educational practices. If principals' experience in supporting special education teachers in the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities is studied, then teacher education preparation programs may be able to grasp the specific challenges for which they need to prepare and support school leaders.

While principals in all geographic areas may be challenged as leaders of special education, leading in a remote rural school district presents unique challenges (Rude & Miller, 2018). The opportunity lies in capturing the experiences remote rural school principals have in supervising the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities to understand the specific support that they need in leading special educators in a rural setting. The support provided by principals may impact teacher retention, and strengthen outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities.

Boyd et.al (2011) indicated that principal leadership was a predictive factor to teachers' intentions to remain in their current position or search for another work opportunity. Teachers who are supported by their principal and are provided with professional development opportunities and necessary resources are likely to remain in their current position (Boyd et. al., 2011). Providing these opportunities to teachers is one of the many tasks for which principals are responsible, and if principals are appropriately trained in the supervision of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, they are likely to provide related and relevant professional development opportunities, resources, and educational guidance for teachers, potentially strengthening their teacher retention.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question: What are remote rural school principals' experiences with implementing FAPE for students with an intellectual disability?

Theoretical Framework

This research was framed through the lens of inclusive principal leadership theory. Inclusive principal leadership theory evolved from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) after the adoption of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) in 2015. The CCSSO is a nationwide organization that is designed to assist students attending public schools in the United States to graduate ready to be successful in life (CCSSO, 2017).

CCSSO recognized the need to include inclusive leadership training into CCSSO standards, so in 2017, the National Collaborative on Inclusive Principal Leadership (NCIPL) was assembled. The NCIPL is a manifold of national organizations and researchers that prepare principals for their supervision role (Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center, 2020). The newly assembled NCIPL partnered with the U.S. Department of Education's Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center (CEEDAR) to design a resource for states to prepare principals to be inclusive leaders. The resource outlines strategies the state department of education can use to advance inclusive leadership through principal preparation programs and schools (CEEDAR, 2020) and most states have narrowed in

on these three main strategies for inclusive improvement: (a) the use of high-leverage practices (HLPs), (b) multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), (c) and positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) (CEEDAR, 2020).

Review of Literature

The Education of Students with Intellectual Disabilities

An intellectual disability is defined in the IDEA (2004) as students with *"significantly sub average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance"* (Sec. 300.8 (c) (6)). An intellectual disability indicates that the student has an intellectual quotient (IQ) below 70 and limitations in the ability to care for themselves and utilize social skills, referred to as adaptive behavior skills. Student's adaptive behavior skills are measured through observation and comparison to other children their age. According to The Institute on Disability, in 2018, approximately 6.3% of the special education population in the United States was comprised of students with intellectual disabilities (2019).

Deficits in language, coping skills, social skills, and other adaptive behavior skills make it difficult for students with intellectual disabilities to express their wants and needs can evoke unexpected behavior in the classroom, negatively impacting a student's academic performance or that of others. Students with intellectual disabilities are also likely to process instructions slower than their peers, especially if the task involves multiple steps (Friend, 2018). Academics and routine daily skills may take a considerable amount of time for students with an intellectual disability to retain.

Educational reforms in the 2000s expanded academic expectations for students in special education (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Greenway et al., 2013). Considerable emphasis was placed on ensuring that all students with intellectual disabilities have access to the general education curriculum to the maximum extent appropriate, and to have the same educational opportunities as their peers without disabilities (Dymond et al., 2007). Ensuring students with intellectual disabilities receive appropriate education and participate in general education to the appropriate extent often presents hurdles for school teams. Teachers must balance student's time within the general education curriculum with their peers, without denying attention to other important educational needs, such as self-support skills (Dymond et al., 2007).

Unique Educational Challenges to Rural Leaders

Although rural schools tend to be favored by families for their small settings, individualized student attention, and safe communities, the ability to provide a free and appropriate public education to all students in a sparsely populated setting has challenges (Rude & Miller, 2018).

Lack of Resources and Qualified Educators

Rural principals are challenged with fiscal limitations and restricted access to educational and technical resources, yet they are expected to meet the same accountability requirements as their

urban and suburban peers (Preston et al., 2013). Rural school districts receive less money from the federal government and property tax monies due to the likelihood of low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Of the 9.6 million public school students in the United States, approximately one out of every five rural school students live in poverty (Strange et al., 2012).

The shortage of qualified teachers in the United States is well documented, as is the shortage of teachers in special education and in rural settings (Showalter et al., 2017; Sindelar et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2016; Viadero, 2018). The greatest shortage of special education teachers is those who serve students with low incidences (LI) disabilities such as autism, intellectual disabilities, and sensory impairments (Jameson et al., 2019).

Sutcher et al. (2016) found the number of educators who have shown interest in working in rural schools has significantly declined in the last decade, which presents a unique set of challenges for school administrators seeking to recruit qualified teachers. Sawchuck (2018) found a remote location, heavy caseloads, and high poverty rates to be among some of the reasons rural school districts struggle to find and keep highly qualified special education teachers.

Partelow (2019), estimated that teacher preparation program enrollment has declined by more than one-third since 2010 in America. In addition to the national decline in teacher preparation enrollment and the rural teacher shortage, the entire nation continues to face a critical shortage of special education teachers (Cuero, 2016). The critical shortage of qualified special education teachers is one of the largest challenges to fulfilling FAPE for students with disabilities (Billingsley, 2002).

General Special Education Knowledge Requirements for School Leaders

The frequently changing leadership responsibilities with legislative action have pressured principals to be accountable for educational disciplines that they are not adequately trained to supervise, including special education (Boscardin et al., 2011). Principals must have a strong understanding of special education issues, policies, instructional practices, and curriculum to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Principals' planning and instructional practices include choosing curriculum materials, guiding instructional strategies, and modification strategies that complement one another, follow IEPs, and lead to student success (Sanzo et al., 2011). Effective principals focus their curricular efforts on establishing high expectations for all students in their school (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

Principal Preparation Programs

As a principal, one must have a solid understanding of IDEA to help lead and monitor special education programs (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Principals must understand the requirements of special education because the number of students receiving special education services has significantly increased in the last 40 years. Pazey and Cole (2013) reported that 3.6 million students were receiving special education services during the 1976–1977 school year. The most recent national standards statistic reported 7.1 million students were receiving special education services during the 2018-2019 school year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019).

Understanding and having the ability to implement the laws and legislative requirements of IDEA is essential to a successful special education program (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Those who oversee the school district's certified staff and those with direct contact with the children should have training in special education requirements. Additionally, they must have the necessary pre-service training to prepare them effectively to meet the needs of all students, but it is most critical when those students have disabilities (Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Principals with a strong special education preparation are more likely to be involved in special education improvement efforts and understand student needs (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Ball and Green (2014) suggest few principals are prepared to be instructional leaders in special education.

Since the implementation of IDEA, administrators have been required to increase the educational opportunities for students with disabilities. Despite the increase in responsibility and accountability on the part of the school principal, research dating back almost 40 years by Hallinger et al., (1983) and O'Reilly and Squires (1985) concluded that most principals studied had minimal to no formal training in special education or required coursework. Principal preparation programs contained little information on special education or its implementation.

As part of determining the level of administrative preparation for school leaders in special education, the researchers reviewed federal, state, and local special education laws and regulations. The state department of education is the state agency responsible for setting the certification requirements for all educators in the state, including administrators (Gümüş & Boylan, 2015). Each state's administrative certification code sets the basic educational requirements, course content, and curriculum for administrators to obtain certification through colleges and universities (Gümüş & Boylan, 2015).

The rural Midwest state's K-12 principal preparation programs must meet the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) program recognition standards (S.D. Administrative Rule 24:53:08:02). The preparation programs "must require candidates to demonstrate the applicable content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge and skills identified in the 2018 NELP standards to demonstrate competency on the applicable multiple assessment measures." School district and campus leaders use these standards to develop curricula and policies that communicate the educational institution's fundamental beliefs and academic outcomes.

Methodology

Qualitative research "begins with assumptions and the use of theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning of individuals or groups ascribed to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). A qualitative transcendental phenomenology design was selected for this study because minimal research exists giving a voice to principals of remote rural schools about the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities and how to best approach methods in leadership preparation programs (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This research is a description of the participants' experiences rather than an interpretation from the researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because no known studies capture the perceptions of principals in remote rural states who implement FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, the qualitative transcendental phenomenological design allowed the researcher to investigate the phenomenon without preconceived barriers set by previous

research.

Selection of Participants

Participants in this study were selected using criterion sampling identifying principals of schools considered remote rural (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). The criteria for selection were principals of remote school districts who had experience supervising a special education teacher(s) who taught at least one student with a primary diagnosis of an intellectual disability. Students with intellectual disabilities often have intense and complex instructional needs and require specialized, intense academic instruction, and often require multiple related services.

Participants who met the following criteria were invited to participate:

a) The participant must be a principal of a remote school as defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics.
b) The principal must have at least one full academic years' experience in providing FAPE as an administrator for one or more students with a primary disability of intellectual disability. An academic year is from August to May.

Principals from elementary, middle school, and high school levels were invited to participate in this study because remote rural school principals often oversee multiple grade level spans within a single building. To identify the school districts in the rural midwest state that were considered remote rural, the researchers used a map of the state provided by the United States Census Bureau. The map defined the areas of the state that are urbanized areas with a population of 50,000 or more as well as urban clusters with a population of 10,000 to 49,999. The researchers used Polkinghorne's recommendation to sample between 5 and 25 or until saturation was reached who have all gone through the same lived experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). This study used a sample of 8 participants.

Limitations

A limitation of this qualitative phenomenological study is the sample. The study only focused on remote rural principals in one midwest state who provide FAPE to students with a primary diagnosis of an intellectual disability. This may be a limitation because the results of this study of rural principals' perceptions may not be applicable to other states. Shenton (2004) noted that "since the findings of qualitative project[s] are specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations" (p. 69).

Data Collection

The researchers gathered data by conducting semi-structured interviews with eight participants. These semi-structured interviews required the researchers and the participant to engage in a formal interview. Structured interview questions were used, and the researchers followed the guide, but were able to follow the participant's topical route in the conversations that may have stridden from the guide if deemed appropriate (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). By listening to

participants explain their experiences with implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, the researchers uncovered their perceptions and the meaning that they ascribed to those experiences. Participant interviews were conducted via Zoom, and were recorded using Zoom and Otter.ai to allow the researchers an opportunity to transcribe and review the discussion to ensure accurate notes and data after the interview.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was structured using Miles and Huberman (1994) systematic approach to analysis as well as Creswell and Poth's (2018) Data Analysis Spiral. The two approaches to analysis complemented each other well, as Creswell and Poth's (2018) method provided a visual outline, and Miles and Huberman (1994) provided further detailed steps in the process for qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data analysis also included reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data were clustered into small categories of information and assigned a label by each researcher. The researchers identified 48 statements during the memo and analysis process. Each theme was supported by participants' personal quotes to strengthen trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

Shenton (2004) summarized trustworthiness in qualitative research as assessing the accuracy of the findings as best described in the study. He suggested that the following four criteria be addressed to assist the researchers in establishing trustworthiness in qualitative studies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability and measures have been put into place to ensure the trustworthiness of this study based on the four criteria.

Credibility

Immediately after each interview, the interviewer documented a reflective commentary of initial impressions of the session to monitor developing constructions and progressive objectivity to ensure credibility (Shenton, 2004). Further, each participant was also given the opportunity to refuse to participate in the study, which ensured that the interviews only involved those who were willing to participate and willing to offer data freely (Shenton, 2004). Also, after the interview transcripts were complete, the participants were asked to review their interview dialogue. This process, known as member checks, provided the participant with the opportunity to consider "if their words match what they actually intended" (Shenton, 2004, p. 68).

Transferability

These research findings are specific to a rural Midwestern state, and it is impossible to predict whether these findings and conclusions are applicable to all principals or rural principals in other states (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, to strengthen transferability, thick descriptions are provided of the population and sample, location, as well as the methods used.

Dependability

Dependability was enhanced by using high-quality recording through Zoom and Otter.ai. The use of both recording devices eliminates the chance of technological error. The interview files were digitally transcribed through Otter.ai and reviewed thoroughly by the researchers to ensure accuracy. Silverman (2013) suggested the use of high-quality recording and transcription to provide the researchers with comprehensive field notes and enhance dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability relates to the research outcomes truly being the result of the research rather than the subjectivity of the researchers. The researchers' reflective commentary post-interviews were used in the creation of thick descriptions of what principals experienced in their implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, as well as the context in which they experienced it (Shenton, 2004). The researcher's field notes and transcripts are available for review by other researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As noted in credibility, member checks were utilized to strengthen confirmability. An in-depth description of the study limitations and methods have been formally introduced to reinforce confirmability.

Inclusive Principal Leadership Findings

Transcendental phenomenology requires the researchers to analyze the data by reducing the information statements or quotes and combining the statements into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These themes were then combined to identify Moustakas's (1994) process of identifying "what" each principal experienced in supervising FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, and "how" they experienced the phenomenon. Three themes emerged using significant participant statements. The themes that emerged from the codes were (a) principals' reliance on their special education teachers to understand and implement mandated law and instructional practices, (b) instructional leadership, and (c) supporting general education teachers.

Principals' Reliance on Special Education Teachers

The results from this study indicate that some remote, rural Midwest principals are not fully prepared to serve students with intellectual disabilities. Some participants indicated that they lack self-efficacy in responding to the needs of students with intellectual disabilities and they lean on their special education teachers to support them. One participant said, "I go to them...quite often and I seek out their guidance" when asked what their experiences have been with being the instructional leader for those who instruct students with intellectual disabilities. Another participant stated, "I go to my special education teachers for help because I don't know. They support me." This indicates many of the participants are distributing leadership solely to the special education teacher and not to themselves or other staff that serves students with intellectual disabilities as suggested by inclusive principal leadership.

Instructional Leadership

Inversely, one participant had an endorsement in early childhood special education, and another participant had a K-12 special education teaching degree. The participants with a background in special education appeared to have significantly higher self-efficacy in the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities than their peers. They seemed to follow the practices of inclusive principal leadership closely. Unlike their peers, their discussions tended to focus on the strengths of their instructional leadership and how they support their special education teachers who teach students with intellectual disabilities. One participant with a special education background advocates for special education teacher preparation time and allows leeway in their schedules to complete necessary paperwork. The other prepares the special education data from their school for entry to the state department of education. This participant uses their knowledge from the entry data to thoroughly review special education teachers' caseloads before the start of the year to ensure one teacher is not "too heavy with the cognitive [students]". Complex caseloads and those that are filled with students with severe disabilities have been linked to emotional burnout in special education teachers and play a significant role in the high attrition rates of those teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2017; Coleman, 2000).

Supporting General Education Teachers

Some participants expressed that general education teachers lack the knowledge of FAPE and instructional methods to teach students with intellectual disabilities. One participant stated, "general education teachers are reluctant or don't feel like they are prepared to teach those [students with intellectual disabilities] students in the classroom. They don't understand student needs, they are focused on fairness. The big challenge is finding ways to train them." Their lack of understanding of special education services and providing modifications for student needs, as required by federal law, impedes the rights of students with intellectual disabilities. As required by IDEA, students with intellectual disabilities should be participating in the general education classroom as much as is appropriate for their ability level.

The general education teacher's lack of understanding of these federal requirements has them relying heavily on the special education teacher for legal compliance and instructional practices. One participant commented that "general education teachers don't always understand students' needs, and they think if I assign 10 pages of reading, everyone must do it", feeling frustrated that some teachers have the mentality that fairness means all students must perform the exact task provided.

Recommendations for Practice and Professional Development

Ongoing Professional Development

Most participants in this study suggested there should be more instruction on the requirements of FAPE and how to serve as the instructional leader for students with intellectual disabilities in educational leadership preparation programs. However, participants also indicated that knowing

the core components of FAPE specifically related to students with intellectual disabilities was not urgent need-to-know information at the start of their instructional leader career.

A gap in research exists about how to prepare principals once they are on the job and supervising teachers who provide services to students with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, the researchers recommend that state departments of education require and provide new principals with specific training on the six core principles of IDEA for students with intellectual disabilities. The core concepts of IDEA, which includes FAPE, ensure students with intellectual disabilities receive appropriate education and participate in the general education curriculum to the appropriate extent. District personnel must comply with these principles to ensure continued federal and state funding for their special education programs.

This training will benefit school leaders through explicit instruction on their instructional leadership responsibilities and state and national legal requirements using the framework of inclusive leadership. Inclusive leaders ensure all students are supported and valued and they do so by responding effectively to the needs of each student (CCSSO, 2017). In collaboration with the required training, the state may consider including professional development for principals for how to encourage and nurture intellectual disabilities in the general education classroom using best practices for tier one instruction (Rogers & Johnson, 2018).

Shared Professional Development with Special Educators

Study participants indicated they heavily rely on their special education teachers for support and guidance in providing services for students with disabilities and ensuring the requirements of FAPE are met. A possible outcome of this reliance is that teachers are already stretched by providing daily services to a diverse group of students, collecting IEP data, conducting and writing educational reports, and other general responsibilities around the school. Special education teachers are strained from trying to fulfill these multiple roles and may be related to the high attrition rate of special education teachers in rural school districts.

The researchers recommend addressing the strain of special education teachers through the following supports. First, the state departments of education could provide required, annual joint training for principals and special education teachers, so they share an understanding of the rules, regulations, and their personal and shared responsibilities under the IDEA. This would also provide the opportunity to establish a clear model of collaboration. Having the training be mandated by the state department of education gives emphasis to the importance of collaboration between principals and special education teachers that may not otherwise be implemented by school district personnel. Second, many remote, rural midwest school districts do not have the financial means to hire a certified special education director, so the building principal fulfills the role. The provided training could serve a dual purpose of the role of the principal, as well as the role of the principal as the special education director.

Mentoring for Remote Rural Practices

Additionally, the researchers suggest state departments of education provide a structured educator-mentoring program to include specific practices for remote rural school districts. Mentorship programs in the field of special education have been suggested to prevent teacher

attrition, increase teacher job satisfaction, and improve teacher quality (Griffin et al., 2003). This mentoring program should be designed with the unique challenges remote rural school district face. The remote location and heavy caseloads are among some of the reasons why remote rural school districts struggle to find and keep qualified special education teachers. Due to the small school size, special education teachers are likely to serve a diverse group of learner needs across multiple grade levels (Brownell et al., 2018). For these reasons, new special education teachers may need more than one mentor, one for content-specific support and the other for basic orientation support.

We recommend the state's education department pair experienced teachers of low incidence disabilities, like intellectual disabilities, with new special education teachers of low incidence disabilities throughout the state to address their content-specific needs. This mentorship may also address the lack of experienced personnel resources in rural school districts as reported by the participating principals. This compares to the work of Johnson et al. (2017) and the rural online mentoring program initiated in another predominantly rural state to provide support to novice teachers, as well as address the special education teacher shortage with experienced special education teacher mentors available around the state. A second mentor may be located within the school district to provide the new teacher with orientation support, as they can answer on-demand specific questions about procedures and logistics of the building/district.

Increase Financial Support for Special Education

Most participants discussed the limited staff they have available in their school district to support all student needs. Participants reported they struggle to find people to fill their support positions, or they do not have the funds to hire more people, leaving their current staff filling multiple roles. Therefore, these students often need more direct instruction and supervision to work on their adaptive behavior skills. This requires consistent and adequate paraprofessional support for academics and behavior.

Support staff are an integral part of the school district and strongly contribute to the success of students (Reddy et al., 2021). Typically, district support staff work nine months out of the year and are paid slightly above minimum wage. One participant stated that "finding those supports [support staff] for students with intellectual disabilities is hard." With an increase of rural school district funding from the state, school districts could pay their support staff a higher wage in an attempt to recruit and retain them within rural school districts.

Additionally, applicants for support staff positions do not need to be certified teachers or have a background in education. They often receive limited training and supervision of students with disabilities once hired (Brock & Carter, 2017). Blatchford et al. (2009) and Farrell et al. (2010) found that support staff who were not adequately trained to provide supports to students with disabilities and a lack of supervision had a limited impact on the students they support. Educational assistants would benefit from being formally trained to work with students with intellectual disabilities and be informed of the legal aspects of IDEA and then effectively supervised to monitor fidelity. To take the financial burden off remote rural school districts, we suggest this training be universal and be provided through the state department of education (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005).

Adoption of HLPs

Teachers and instructional leaders play an important role in the academic and behavioral success of students with intellectual disabilities. Research by McLeskey and Brownell (2015) indicated that all teacher candidates, despite their academic discipline, benefit from a set of critical practices that are necessary to improve student learning and behavior, which should be learned in coursework, and explicitly practiced during field experiences, while receiving feedback from their supervisors. These critical practices are the high leverage practices designed by CEC and CEEDAR and can be essential tools for improving the outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities when recognized and implemented. The researchers suggest all Midwest higher education teacher and administration preparation programs adopt the High Leverage Practices (HLPs) as a guide to prepare teacher administration candidates with the essential knowledge and skills necessary to ensure fidelity to the supervision of instruction of teachers who support students with intellectual disabilities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Overall, the amount of research addressing students with intellectual disabilities and their right to FAPE is extremely limited. Further research is needed to better understand the connection between the heavy reliance on the special educator and the challenges in recruitment and retention of special educators. Additionally, it would be beneficial to study where new special education teachers (those within their first three years of teaching) seek support for students with intellectual disabilities and gain experience with low incidence disabilities and to what extent this support contributes to their decision to remain or leave the profession or district. Research around perceptions of leadership support gathered from special educators who left the field might also prove to be a rich resource for understanding what levels/types of support were more helpful than others or which supports were lacking.

Conclusion

The experiences of eight participants provided insight to the needs of remote rural school district leaders and teachers of students with intellectual disabilities. Rural school district leaders are tasked with the role of ensuring FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, yet they reported they were not trained to do so in their administrative preparation program. Due to their lack of preparation, many district level leaders rely on the special education teachers who provide direct services to students with intellectual disabilities. Further, participants experienced general education teachers that are not adequately prepared to provide instruction to students with intellectual disabilities in the classroom, causing them to also rely heavily on the building special education teachers for support. Without ongoing professional development for school district leaders and teachers directed toward the requirements of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, special education teachers in remote rural areas will continue to support their leaders and co-teachers, continually adding to the low special education teacher attrition rates.

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